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PRIMARY SOURCE

I Was Putin's Pawn

What it was like to work for the Russian propaganda machine, and why I quit on live TV.

By ELIZABETH WAHL | March 21, 2014

I knew I had to quit. I'd been a correspondent for RT—the English-language international cable network funded by the Russian government—for about two and a half years. I'd looked the other way as the network smeared America for the sake of making the Kremlin look better by comparison, while it sugarcoated atrocities by one brutal dictator after another. I'd been thinking about leaving for a long time, but was trying to hang in there until I figured out my next move.

Then Russia invaded Ukraine, and I came to see just how dangerous a propaganda tool the network was. I couldn't be a part of it any longer. I decided, somewhat arbitrarily, that March 5th would be my last day. And when that day came, after some particularly egregious coverage of the Ukraine crisis, I knew my resignation had to be public; I couldn't just silently disappear. That afternoon, I went to the bathroom to scribble down some thoughts before making my dramatic exit. During the 5 p.m. broadcast, after the coverage of Ukraine wrapped up, I made my closing statements:

"I cannot be part of a network funded by the Russian government that whitewashes the actions of Putin," I said. "I am proud to be an American and believe in disseminating the truth. And that is why, after this newscast, I am resigning."

My heart racing, I took my earpiece out and got up from the anchor chair. As I gathered my belongings, the news director said he wanted to have a word with me in his office. He asked me why I did it, as though I had some reason other than the one I had just announced on live TV. I explained that it really was because of the propaganda RT was pushing about Ukraine. Then I left the building and walked a couple blocks to a restaurant to sit down and let the reality of what I did settle in.

Fifteen minutes later, my phone started ringing.

I first arrived on the job at the Washington, D.C., bureau in September 2011. I came ready to take on the “stories the mainstream media ignores” and to do hard-hitting news that *really* matters. That’s the job I signed on for, anyway.

ADVERTISING

When RT first contacted me, I was working as a reporter and anchor 8,000 miles away on the island of Saipan, in the U.S. Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, a 40-minute plane ride from Guam. I had been there for about two years, reporting for the local news station on topics like immigration and local political corruption. Before making the move across the globe, I had freelanced at a local news station in my home state of Connecticut, and had done several internships in broadcast news, including at NBC and Fox.

Island life was a blast, but around the time I decided I was ready to move back to the mainland, RT emailed me out of the blue. Apparently the news director had seen one of my reports—on how Saipan was preparing to handle possible radiation exposure after the Fukushima disaster—on YouTube and thought I’d be a good addition to RT.

The news director, who was Russian, pitched the network as an alternative news source that dared to challenge conventions. “Question More” was the network’s slogan. During our Skype interview and on subsequent emails, there was little talk about Russia, or any indication the news would be influenced by Russian politics. I had some misgivings and asked about editorial independence. He scoffed, and asserted that the network was providing alternative news that mainstream outlets didn’t want to hear. I wondered why the network was interested in me since I’m not Russian and have no ties to the country, but I checked out RT America’s online videos and saw that almost all of the on-air correspondents were from the United States.

I was a little skeptical about the whole thing, but I couldn’t find much concrete information on the Internet about the station and its mission and I didn’t know anyone who’d ever worked there. I figured there are other networks that do respected journalism while getting some form of government funding. Also, the Cold War was over. Weren’t we supposed to be mending ties? It’s not like it was North Korea.

Here was an opportunity to move to D.C. and work on stories of national and international significance. I knew my other options would likely require moving to some Podunk town to cover rescued kittens and the Fourth of July parade.

Maybe I ignored some red flags. Maybe I should have asked tougher questions. But from my post in the Pacific, RT looked like a good opportunity.

I took the job.

The first few days were ... interesting. The top guys were all Russian, but most of my co-workers were American. Some colleagues warned me that I’d need to let go of any preconceived notions and journalistic principles. I wasn’t exactly sure what they meant.

It was during this first week that the Occupy Wall Street movement began with a group of protesters in New York’s Zuccotti Park. The day after the demonstration started, the Russian news director announced at our morning meeting that this was the top story and we would take it on with full force. It was Occupy all day, every day, from coast to coast.

I spent a lot of time interviewing Occupy protestors in D.C.’s McPherson Square. Some had legitimate grievances: the rising role of money in politics, frustration over taxpayers footing the bill for bailing out big banks and crippling student-loan debt. But others were just hippies who were camping out, barefoot and beating drums, and had jumped at the opportunity to come together in solidarity against The Man.

Of course the coverage made the United States look terrible. Video of outraged protesters, heavy-handed police and tents pitched in parks portrayed America as a country in the midst of a popular uprising—it was the beginning of the inevitable decline of a capitalistic world power.

Occupy was our lead story for weeks and then months, even as the number of protesters dwindled and tents cleared out. We sucked that story completely dry.

Eventually, it was accepted that a revolution was not upon us.

Meanwhile, in Moscow thousands of demonstrators took to the streets protesting alleged election fraud and corruption, with most of their outrage directed at Russian leader Vladimir Putin, who announced his intention to run for president for a third term. There was little, if any, talk in our newsroom or on our newscasts of the dissent in Russia.

Soon our attention shifted to the 2012 presidential election. In RT's eyes, only one candidate mattered: Ron Paul. I don't remember Paul ever speaking to RT during campaign season, but that didn't stop our obsessive coverage of the "rock star" candidate. After a while the bosses' fixation with him seemed bizarre. Why were they pushing non-stop coverage of this long shot? Something tells me it wasn't his message of freedom and liberty but his non-interventionist stance and consistent criticism of U.S. foreign policy. His message fit RT's narrative that the United States is a huge bully.

The network's coverage of foreign leaders was just as slanted, and more disturbing. After the death of Libyan leader Muammar Qadhafi, about a month into my time at RT, I was assigned to do a segment on how the dictator was once best buddies with the United States. I wasn't sure how to turn that into a full-scale reported package, but I was told to make it work by including photographs of the late dictator shaking hands and schmoozing with Western leaders. Add a couple mainstream media clips of talking heads celebrating his death and—boom—there's a story. The theme, the producer made clear, was U.S. hypocrisy ... how dare Americans meddle in a conflict when Sen. John McCain once dined with the country's leader?

It was a theme the network returned to over and over. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad? The West was simply stoking fears of the Iranian president's plans to create a nuclear weapon as a pretense to go to war. Plus, the guy had some good points. Speaking at the U.N. General Assembly in 2010, Ahmadinejad said the biggest threat facing the world is U.S. domination.

Bashar Assad? Syria's bloody civil war was characterized by violence on both sides. The chemical attack near Damascus that killed hundreds of civilians was yet another excuse for the United States and its allies to swoop in, attack and support regime change. One particularly appalling article on the RT website, titled "Footage of chemical attack in Syria is a fraud," cited statements from a Catholic nun in Syria who asked "where parents of the supposedly dead children are."

I was disgusted and disappointed by the whitewashing of brutal dictators—and glad to be covering domestic issues. I tried to pitch stories I felt were important and underrepresented. From time to time, I would report on something I found worthwhile, and feel a little better about the cognitive dissonance I was suffering from. I went inside the country's largest jail in Cook County, Chicago, to expose how mental health patients flooded the correctional facility, highlighted the victims of the so-called War on Drugs who were unjustly incarcerated for decades for petty drug crimes and consistently covered the Bradley Manning trial in Fort Meade, Md. But I knew the stories would only fly if they fit the network's narrative that America is a crumbling nation plagued with problems.

Another troubling thing about RT was its popularity among fringe extremists. Abby Martin, who uses her platform on the network to advocate an anti-Western ideology, has a cult following among 9/11 "truthers" who believe the attack was an inside job orchestrated by a small group of political elites. The Russian bosses love her lack of restraint in catering to a paranoid audience and blaming the mainstream media for conspiring to deliver the U.S. government agenda. Many of her fans say the Sandy Hook shooting was a hoax and that smoke left by aircraft are "chemtrails" containing chemical or biological agents the government is using for sinister reasons ranging from psychological warfare to population control. The more deranged the conspiracy theory, the more the Russian managers seemed to love it.

When Martin went off-script condemning Russia invading, I was proud of her. The Russian bosses, stumped on how to handle the situation, suggested sending her on a trip to Crimea. She didn't go, knowing full well that it would be a "vetted PR experience," as she called it. RT then used her brief moment of dissent to their advantage, asserting, "Contrary to the popular opinion, RT doesn't beat its journalists into submission, and they are free to express their own opinions, not just in private but on the air. This is the case with Abby's commentary on the Ukraine."

But it was the very next day that the biased, Kremlin-driven coverage of Ukraine was pushed on the newscast, with propaganda and censorship like I've never seen it before. That added to my conviction that I had to resign, and do it publicly. RT was trying to use Martin to lend credibility to the network when I knew they were pushing lies. I wanted the viewers and the public to know what the station is really about.

There was one exception to the hostile-toward-the-West approach: pornography. Anything erotic was encouraged. Sexbots, the regulation of the porn industry—any excuse to get a porn star on the show made the head Russian honchos excited. I assumed the goal here was to stimulate the viewership, which largely consisted of young men who tuned into RT America, mostly online.

Throughout my time at the network, I heard colleagues repeat various justifications for continuing to work there ranging from “we’re providing a different perspective,” to “everyone has an agenda” to “it’s a job.” I resolved to only report facts, and I fell out of favor with the Russian managers for pushing back when they wanted me to push an angle I wasn’t comfortable with. (There’s a reason why many of the employees there are young and inexperienced.)

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Producers booked clearly pro-Russian, anti-American guests, and I was instructed to egg them on.

But when the turmoil in Ukraine deepened, the justifications no longer sufficed for me. The coverage of Ukraine was about promoting a Putinist agenda as Russia shamelessly invaded the country. When reports of armed military personnel at the airports surfaced, we were told to downplay them. When it became clear that troops on the ground in Crimea were Russian, RT dubbed them “self-defense forces.”

Producers booked clearly pro-Russian, anti-American guests, and I was instructed to egg them on. I was told to play up the extremist elements of the opposition, painting the new government as driven by neo-Nazi nationalists. But I also did my own research, and the more I learned about the uprising, the more my eyes opened to how the network was being used as a tool to push Putin’s agenda. It was a complex situation, sure, but there was at least one simple, irreducible fact: Russia had invaded Ukraine and lied about it.

I stopped to think about who I was and what I was doing. On my father’s side, both of my grandparents were immigrants from Hungary. My grandfather arrived in the U.S. around the end of World War II. My grandmother arrived 10 years later as a refugee from the 1956 Hungarian uprising, a nationwide revolt against Soviet forces that eventually forced Hungary into submission.

My grandmother, her brother and their mother managed to escape by bribing guards on the border with brandy and cash. The guards warned them that they would have to shoot around them to make it look like they were shooting to kill. They ran for the Austrian border as the guards fired a hail of bullets. It was a gamble: Sometimes the guards would take the bribes and shoot people anyway. When my grandmother made it across the border, she realized she had made it to safety but wasn’t sure if her brother and mother were alive. Eventually they found each other amid the smoke and dust and broke down crying. They were greeted by Red Cross personnel, taken to a refugee camp and granted passage to America.

I decided I could not work for a station that was spewing lies to justify Russian military intervention in a sovereign country. For months, I had wanted to quit, but decided I could not delay any longer. Nothing was worth being part of the Putin propaganda machine.

On the Wednesday I planned to be my last day, every story relating to Ukraine seemed designed to push Putin’s warped view toward the country. I had a pre-taped interview that day with none other than Ron Paul. The news director emailed me a list of questions like this one: “Isn’t it fascinating how US officials and the mainstream media are able to quickly arrive at a moral judgment condemning foreign interventionism on the part of Russia while, at the same time, blocking out of their minds all the foreign interventionism on the part of the US government for the past many decades?”

I didn’t ask Paul all the questions I was given, and I substituted some of my own, including what the United States should do in light of Russia invading. How should Washington respond? Later, I saw the video editor cutting out “Russia invading” after, he said, higher-ups ordered him to do so. (Russia is not characterizing its actions as an invasion.) The uncensored version of the interview was posted online briefly before it was taken down and replaced with the edited one.

I decided that not only did I have to quit, I had to let viewers know why—to tell them the truth about RT and its misleading coverage. I went to the bathroom, wrote down some heartfelt notes and prepared for my exit a couple hours later. It was then that I contacted Jamie Kirchick, a writer with *The Daily Beast*, and told him my resignation was imminent. I first reached out to Kirchick a few months ago after he criticized Russia’s anti-gay laws on the RT airwaves. I told him it was a bold move and I was willing to eventually come forward with the truth about RT. I informed him that the time had come and how I planned to do it. He published the exclusive story. Little did I know just how far word of my resignation would go.

The response has been unbelievable. I was flooded with interview requests from national and international news organizations. The clip went viral quickly, with millions of hits on YouTube.

I’ve received thousands of messages from people around the world voicing their support.

“I am from a group of Judaism called Hasidim where females are not particularly seen as brave and smart,” one of the most touching messages said. “So after seeing the video of your resignation I asked my wife and 3 daughters to sit down with me and watch it together to show them how brave and smart a woman can be.”

But I also received some hateful messages. RT’s official response was that my actions were a “self-promotional stunt.” Critics accused me of “selling out to the

mainstream media.”

After I went on CNN and mentioned the way my Ron Paul interview was edited, RT then reposted the original version. (There are now two versions online, one with and one without the edited question). The network later asked Paul for a comment about the interview—misleading him to believe that I quit because his message was censored—and posted Paul’s response:

“Wahl’s questions were all legitimate,” Paul stated. “I would say that it essentially all got in there in a fair and balanced manner but she implied they edited something I said that might have benefited her position. I don’t recall any of that. I thought the report and the essence of what they put on TV was exactly the message I was trying to get out.”

That response and the way RT misrepresented the situation led to a deluge of hate tweets from Paul’s supporters accusing me of lying about the interview, and saying that it was proof that my resignation was fraudulent.

I asked Paul’s people to set the record straight. I explained what happened, even providing two versions of the video as proof that it was the editing of my question that I took issue with. His media representative responded to my concerns by saying: “We are actually on hiatus until the 24th. I don’t want to rush to respond to your request or the details in your email but I will discuss this with my colleagues and will present this to Dr. Paul when it is appropriate.”

I also got a long voicemail from someone named Kevin Gosztola, who represented himself as a journalist with First Look Media, Pierre Omidyar’s new organization, though it turns out he’s not employed there. “We’re going to be putting forward some allegations about you and your time at RT,” the message said. After about two minutes of accusations and rambling, he concluded: “If you have something to say for this story to defend yourself before we go ahead and publish, you have about 24 hours.” I never called him back. (He left a similarly long harassing message to *The Daily Beast*, which checked with First Look, only to find that he was not an employee.)

Gosztola never published an attack on me. But nearly two weeks later, one of Abby Martin’s close friends (whom she invited to the RT holiday party, where the two of them posed for a picture giving the middle finger to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu) wrote a story on the website Truthdig that claimed to “uncover” that my resignation was part of a greater conspiracy, stating, “Behind the coverage of Wahl’s dramatic protest, a cadre of neoconservatives was celebrating a public relations coup.” It was surreal to read such an elaborate and far-fetched story about me.

Some of the vitriol came from within RT. One of my former colleagues tweeted the Truthdig link along with this message: “it’s a pity when someone claiming to be committed to ‘disseminating the truth’ turns out to be a big ball of lies.” And others were quoted in the article itself describing me as “an apolitical, deeply disgruntled employee seeking an exit strategy.”

But from what I can tell it’s a small handful of RT loyalists behind the hate. Several current and former employees have sent me messages commending me for finally blowing the whistle on this sketchy organization that poses as legitimate news.

More than anything, I feel like a weight has been lifted since I resigned. The outpouring of support has reaffirmed my belief in seeking and spreading the truth. As for my “self-promotional publicity stunt,” if telling truth leads to better opportunities, some of my faith in humanity will be restored.